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Press

Quiche Eaters, Read No Further

Soldier of Fortune, ten years old, wants only the macho

The publisher, fresh off the plane from Johannesburg, breezes into the office and props his feet on a desk. "The Colonel," as he likes to be called, discusses upcoming story ideas. Should next month's cover feature a new machine gun, which the Colonel himself tested in South Africa? What's the latest battlefield news from Afghanistan and El Salvador? The executive editor is there, but not the small-arms editor or the sniping-countersniping editor. The meeting soon breaks up, but not before the Colonel warns a staffer headed for Central America, "Be careful down there."

No, this is not the office of *Vanity Fair*. Perhaps the only place where such a story conference could occur is at *Soldier of Fortune*, the macho magazine for adventurers (armchair and otherwise). The Colonel is Robert K. Brown, 52, a.k.a. "Uncle Bob," the onetime Green Beret who started the magazine in 1975 and owns its lock, stock and carbine barrel. *Soldier of Fortune* is a direct reflection of its creator: blunt, individualistic, muscularly anti-Communist. As Brown celebrates *Soldier of Fortune's* tenth anniversary this month, he makes no apology for the combative style—either his or the magazine's. Since its founding as a quarterly with a print run of 8,500, *Soldier of Fortune*, based in Boulder, has grown into a glossy monthly with a circulation of 166,000, as much as such dissimilar journals as *Harper's* and *Mother Jones*. "We have found a spot," says Brown. "We put our lives where our mouths are, and readers can identify with that."

Brown has certainly given new meaning to the phrase participatory journalism. The magazine has collected more than \$100,000 for the Afghan rebels and dispatched its explosives-demolitions editor to instruct the mujahedin on the use of anti-tank mines. Brown has organized a dozen teams to train the Salvadoran army and loaned nine staffers to teach the *contras* fighting the Nicaraguan government. Brown still promises a \$10,000 bounty, announced in 1979, for the return of Dictator Idi Amin to Uganda to stand trial. But that reward is peanuts compared with his latest offer: \$1 million to any pilot who defects with an Mi-24 helicopter, the Soviet high-tech chopper delivered to the Sandinistas last year.

The foreign ventures usually end up as stories in the magazine, along with reminiscences of wartime derring-do, eyewitness

combat reports and ratings of the latest weapons. (Like publishers sending their books to a magazine for review, gun manufacturers ship their latest products to *Soldier of Fortune* editors, who test them at a nearby range.) The prose is meat-and-potatoes style, heavy on facts, strategy and rip-roaring action. The September issue includes a feature about British Gurkha troops stationed in Belize, an interview with an Israeli army sniper and a story detailing which stainless-steel handguns fare best in the rust-inducing jungles of



Brown with assault rifles and Soviet shrapnel from Central America
Proud of the combative nature of himself and the magazine.

El Salvador (answer: the Randall LeMay and the Walther PPK/S).

The lunge for the jugular is most apparent in the ads. Since firearms cannot be sold through the mails, weapon manufacturers offer only catalogs to readers. But enough lethal ware, from blowguns to exploding arrows to mini-garrotes, can be bought to fend off any guerrillas who might happen to invade your backyard. Budding adventurers can bone up on techniques by ordering *Get Even: The Complete Book of Dirty Tricks* ("You'll never again have to 'grin and bear it' when inconsiderate creeps do you dirty"; \$12.95) while sipping coffee from a *Soldier of Fortune* mug (\$7.95) and relaxing on a military cot (\$99.50). The classifieds bristle with notices from mercenaries, some less discreet than others (MERC FOR HIRE, advertised a man named Dan.

NEED WORK FAST). Gung-ho types who apply directly to the magazine are warned that enlisting soldiers of fortune within the U.S. is against the law. Brown maintains, however, that he can publish the ads because he is merely acting as a conduit.

Brown's disavowals have not convinced everybody. In 1979 Democratic Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder asked the Justice Department to investigate whether *Soldier of Fortune* was recruiting mercenaries. The probe

turned up nothing illegal. Schroeder still criticizes the magazine for its "romanticization of war." Says she: "One country's mercenaries are another country's terrorists." One reason why the magazine has failed to ignite much opposition may be because few in Washington take it as seriously as Brown would like. Brown returns the compliment, saying the Central Intelligence Agency is manned by "hundreds of incompetents."

The magazine's readers are almost exclusively men, most of them between 18 and 34. Nearly half are servicemen, vets or law enforcement officers, according to a survey by Starch INRA Hooper, a New York research firm. Many readers seem to be Walter Mittys, content to experience danger vicariously. The magazine derives most of its revenue from circulation, but Brown is now pushing to attract big-name advertisers, including car and liquor companies. "It would be a hard sell for a media buyer," admits Advertising Manager Joan Steele. "The mercenary thing tarnishes our image."

The Folio, 400, the bible of the magazine industry, estimates that *Soldier of Fortune's* revenues dipped from \$7.5 million in 1983 to \$6.9 million last year, but Brown is confident enough to have launched two new magazines, *Guns & Action* and *Combat Weapons*, in the past year. He views the country's recent outbreak of Rambomania as proof that the climate is improving for his brand of journalism. Even though *Soldier of Fortune* is always certain to draw hoots of disapproval, the Colonel is not the kind to care. Ambling through the office in faded jeans and T shirt, cracking jokes with editors, squirting streams of chewing tobacco into strategically placed spittoons, Bob Brown is happy in his work. "I get to do things that nobody else can," he says. "Vacation for me is attacking a fort in Afghanistan."

—By James Kelly.

Reported by Richard Woodbury/Denver

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